From the Author
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SERMON, &c.

DIE JOVIS, 26° FEBRUARII, 1795.

" ORDERED by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal
" in Parliament aſſembled, That the Thanks of
" this Houſe, be, and are hereby given to the
" Lord Biſhop of BRISTOL, for the Sermon by him
" preached before this Houſe Yeſterday, in the
" Abbey-Church Weſtminſter; And he is hereby
" deſired to cauſe the ſame to be forthwith printed
" and publiſhed."

GEORGE ROSE, Cler. Parliament.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

IN THE

ABBEY-CHURCH, WESTMINSTER,

ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1795,

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED BY HIS MAJESTY'S PROCLAMATION

FOR

A GENERAL FAST.

By HENRY-REGINALD, Lord Bishop of BRISTOL.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. ROBSON, BOOKSELLER, NEW BOND-STREET.

1795.

A

SERMON.

DANIEL IX. V. 9. 10.

TO THE LORD OUR GOD BELONG MERCIES AND FORGIVENESSES, THOUGH WE HAVE REBELLED AGAINST HIM; NEITHER HAVE WE OBEYED THE VOICE OF THE LORD OUR GOD, TO WALK IN HIS LAWS, WHICH HE SET BEFORE US.

THERE is no conſideration which it is more neceſſary to have conſtantly impreſſed on our minds, than that of the ſhort-ſightedneſs of man, as compared with the omniſcience of God. It is true indeed, that the powers and faculties of the human mind, when contemplated as being ingrafted upon

mere animal exiſtence, may juſtly excite a conſiderable degree of admiration. The arts and ſciences, conducive to the comfort and accommodation of life, have been, in different ages, carried to a wonderful degree of perfection; and even in moral ſcience, the reaſoning principle has appeared to make ſurpriſing exertions, and build up very ſublime and noble ſyſtems. But ſtill this praiſe and admiration muſt be relative to the ſtate and condition of human nature; which, as we are equally taught by reaſon and ſcripture, muſt, even in its higheſt ſtate of cultivation, fall infinitely ſhort of His perfection, in whoſe image it was created. The brighteſt wits, therefore, and the deepeſt reaſoners, have found themſelves baffled, when they have attempted to get beyond the limits aſſigned to their imperfect nature; and particularly, when they have endeavoured to ſcrutinize the ways of providence, and by ſearching to find out God.

Among the good effects which may ariſe from a due impreſſion of this our own inſufficiency, one of the moſt eſſential ſeems to be, the force it muſt give to that ſalutary principle, *our entire dependence upon God.* Senſible that in His hands only are the iſſues of our preſent and future happineſs, we ſhall neceſſarily be perſuaded, that to learn His will, and to practiſe it, muſt be the whole duty and intereſt of man; and that,

that, ſo long as we conduct ourſelves by this rule, we may ſafely leave the reſt to God.

This diſpoſition will be of equal uſe to check the confidence inſpired by ſucceſs, and the deſpondency ariſing from diſappointment; to correct the fallacy of our reaſonings, and the weakneſs of our conjectures; and to lead us, through the changes and chances of this fluctuating and uncertain life, to the attainment of that peace which the world cannot give.

It has been the reproach of bold Infidelity againſt Religion, that it was the offspring of Fear. But the charge was ſhallow and miſtaken; ſince the fact might fairly be admitted, without any of the concluſions intended to be drawn from it. So far as Fear ariſes from a ſenſe of our own impotence and the All-ſufficiency of God; from an apprehenſion of incurring His vengeance, "who is able to deſtroy both body and ſoul in hell*;" ſo far it may be deemed a juſt ground of religious worſhip; and perhaps ought naturally to lay the firſt foundation of that obedience, which may afterwards be aſſiſted and perfected by love. Let us then not be aſhamed of that Fear, which, we are juſtly told, is the beginning of wiſdom; but ſhew ourſelves alway's diſpoſed to purſue its dictates, by rendering to the Su-

* Matt. x. v. 28.

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preme Being every mode of worſhip, which either the light of Reaſon or of Revelation has pointed out to us as proper.

Under this guidance, we ſhall not only be led to offer Him praiſe and thankſgiving for that *mercy which is over all His works*; to addreſs Him with prayer and ſupplication for the ſupply of our neceſſities, the relief of our diſtreſſes, and the ſupport of our weakneſs; but to turn to Him alſo with every act of repentance and contrition, which can denote a true ſenſe of our own unworthineſs, and an unfeigned ſorrow for thoſe ſins by which we have forfeited His favour. The neceſſity of ſuch repentance ariſes from that corruption, which being originally introduced by the fall of our firſt parents, is continually foſtered and increaſed by our own actual tranſgreſſions; and which muſt render all other acts of devotion ineffectual towards reſtoring us to the hopes from which we have fallen. It was from an imperfect ſenſe of this condition, aided, perhaps, by the obſcure remains of a Divine Revelation, that the doctrine of expiatory ſacrifice prevailed ſo univerſally in the Heathen world; whilſt it was kept up alſo by the ſpecial inſtitution of God in the Jewiſh law, as preparatory to that great and univerſal propitiation promiſed in the Meſſiah. But it is in Chriſtianity alone that we can view the ſubject in a true and ſatiſ-

factory light; while we ſee the expiation already made by God Himſelf, but repentance exacted from man as the condition upon which his claim to it muſt be enſured.

Repentance then, regarded as the means of obtaining pardon for our ſins, and reſtoring us to the favour of God, however it may be in ſome degree deducible from a conſideration of His nature, as a God of mercy and loving-kindneſs, is yet, in a peculiar ſenſe, to be looked upon as a Chriſtian doctrine; as making part of that diſpenſation which God has revealed to us by his Son, and upon which we profeſs to found our faith and our hopes. And, reſpect being had to the univerſal prevalence of ſin, we may eſtabliſh it as the only ground upon which any individual among us can look for acceptance from God.

But although this doctrine of repentance, thus conſidered in reference to the great atonement made for ſin by our Redeemer Jeſus Chriſt, can have reſpect only to our condition in the life to come, yet the principles upon which we are naturally led to look up to God as the Author of every good gift; as the Rewarder of righteouſneſs, and the Avenger of iniquity; will juſtify a ſimilar application to Him in our national character, in order to deprecate his wrath,

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and regain his favour and protection. Hence the duty of rulers to enjoin acts of public humiliation and repentance; and of ſubjects, to obey the call with ſincerity. It is not an appeal to God to decide between us and our enemy on every particular quarrel, in which we happen to be engaged; but it is a general acknowledgement of His ſuperintending providence, a confeſſion of our unworthineſs, and a ſorrow for thoſe ſins, which we have united in committing againſt Him. The principle upon which theſe acknowledgements are made ſhould indeed be always in our minds; but the particular expreſſion of it may naturally be called forth by particular emergencies. In the day of adverſity we are properly led to *conſider*, and *turn ourſelves* to the Lord; and in our proſperity to give Him the glory. But while we embrace theſe opportunities of thus manifeſting the general courſe of our ſentiments, we ſhould be careful not to render them occaſions of deciding haſtily on His judgements, ſo as to drive us into deſpondency on the one hand, or exalt us to confidence on the other. The ways of God are unſearchable: and though it be true, as has long ago been aſſerted, that "His judgements "are in all the earth," yet they are not to be traced on every occaſion, on which the too curious eye of man may pretend to diſcover them. If therefore we hope to reap any laſting benefit from our compliance

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with theſe ſolemnities, we muſt take care, that our repentance be ſincere and conſtant; and that, when we aſſemble ourſelves together on ſuch occaſions as the preſent, we come rather to give energy to habitual impreſſions, than to exert any new and particular act of devotion. Nor ſhould we be induced to quit our hold, or relax in our perſeverance, becauſe the wicked may appear to triumph over us. We know, indeed, that it is conſiſtent both with the nature and the word of God, that, in the end, "righteouſneſs exalteth a "nation, and ſin is a reproach, or deſtruction, to any "people*." But, admitting for a moment, that we had any merit to plead, yet, as neither our own virtue nor the wickedneſs of our enemies can give us any right to the protection of God, we muſt leave to Him to permit thoſe cauſes to produce their effects, in whatever time and manner He ſees fit; remembering only, that the trueſt indication of our patriotiſm will be, to contribute our reſpective ſhares to that general ſyſtem of conduct, upon which, amidſt all the changes and chances of the world, our national proſperity, as well as our private happineſs, muſt ultimately depend.

* Prov. xiv. v. 34. The author is aware, that among the various explanations given to this text, able commentators have reſtrained it to a more limited meaning; but he thought himſelf at liberty on the preſent occaſion to make uſe of the more extended ſenſe, authoriſed by the Engliſh and many other tranſlations.

But the aſſertion of any ſuch claim of merit on our part, even if it could be valid, carries with it a preſumption, that belongs not to ſinful man; and eſpecially at a time, when it is peculiarly our duty to conſider the reverſe of ſuch a picture. And, I fear, it muſt readily be confeſſed, there can be no want of materials to ſupply a very different account.

The vices, indeed, of a rich and flouriſhing people have been in general of ſo ſimilar a caſt, that the deſcription of them, and the denunciation of their conſequences made to one age and nation, may, with propriety, be transferred to another. All the woes, therefore, denounced by the antient Prophets againſt the kingdom of Babylon, at that time the ſeat of luxury and wickedneſs, and all the pictures drawn by the Apoſtles of the opulent cities of the Roman Empire, have been applied, both by the ſatiriſt and the preacher, to the powerful ſtates of modern Europe. And while we acknowledge, with the utmoſt contrition, the juſtice of the application as made to ourſelves, may we not add, that the preſent age is diſtinguiſhed alſo by new and peculiar acceſſions of national guilt; that the leaven of immorality, irreligion, and falſe philoſophy, which has long been fermenting in the world, has at length nearly ſucceeded in leavening the whole maſs; and that the

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wicked induſtry of impiety has too effectually exerted its endeavours to poiſon the public mind, and accommodate to the capacities of all men, thoſe pernicious doctrines and principles, which had hitherto been fortunately confined to a narrower circle?

To this ſource may we not trace up that reſtleſneſs and impatience of legal reſtraint; that propenſity to ſubvert the principles of civil order, and well regulated ſociety; that abuſe and neglect of the moſt valuable bleſſings man is capable of enjoying, rational liberty, and religious faith, which have, of late, been ſo eminently conſpicuous?

But although the antidotes which have, from time to time, been adminiſtered, have not been ſufficient to ſtop the ſpreading of the poiſon, nor to ſtem the torrent of vice and immorality, which was deluging the world; yet we may hope, that the admonitions have not been totally thrown away upon us: that ſome check may occaſionally have been given to the progreſs of wickedneſs; the obdurate ſoftened, the profligate reclaimed, and the careleſs awakened to recollection. Enough at leaſt, we truſt, may have been produced, to encourage Us of the miniſtry to continue and repeat our attempts; to call upon you in the name of Him whoſe commiſſion we bear, and

urge you to look well to your ways, and conſider the conſequences of your conduct to yourſelves, your poſterity, and your country. And ſurely the ſituation of that unhappy people, with whom we are now engaged, muſt hold up to us an awful warning, what a dreadful thing it is to be given up to a reprobate mind, and toſſed to and fro by our own vain imaginations. Whatever may be the final ſettlement of their conſtitution, through what ſcenes of plunder, rapine, and murder, muſt they have paſſed to it! through what a gradation of crimes have they proceeded to arrive at that height of miſery and impiety, which they have now attained! Wretched and deluded men! who, after having deſolated and ruined their own country, are become an inſtrument in the hand of Providence to execute his vengeance upon others. What ſhare of this vengeance either our crimes may have deſerved, or the juſtice of God may think fit to inflict upon us, muſt be left to his unerring wiſdom. It is our duty to kiſs the rod, and to receive, without murmuring, the chaſtiſements of his hand. But it is equally our duty to improve, under a due acknowledgement of his providence, all the means afforded us of averting the ſtorm with which we are threatened. We know, that were the proſpect ever ſo gloomy, His arm is not ſhortened that he cannot ſave us, nor, whenever he ſees fit, be

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able to bring good out of evil. But neither I truſt are we deſtitute of human means, to which, under the ſame acknowledgement of the ſuperintending Providence of God, we may be permitted to look for relief from the dangers which threaten us both from within and without.

Difference in forms of government is, it muſt be acknowledged, of little avail in the eye of Religion, any farther than as they afford greater or leſs means of promoting the preſent happineſs of mankind, and leading them to pay a due attention to the ſecurity of their future welfare. But, under this view, I flatter myſelf we are juſtified in conſidering the excellent Conſtitution we have ſo long enjoyed; a Conſtitution, which before its eſtabliſhment was looked forward to in the Theories of antient writers, and which, till this age of novelty and refinement, has ever been the admiration and envy of ſurrounding nations. The intrinſic merit of ſuch a Conſtitution will therefore ſurely afford one ground of hope that we ſhall not readily be tempted to betray and abandon ſo valuable a bleſſing; the preſervation of which in all its branches will become, under theſe conſiderations, not only a civil but a religious duty. If we are really impreſſed with a due ſenſe of the importance of this bleſſing, we muſt be aware that it can only be effectually ſecured,

by a concurrence of all thoſe component parts, whoſe intereſts are ſo intimately blended together as to become inſeparable from each other. And while we look with aſtoniſhment and horror at any appearance of attempts to ſubvert our civil and religious eſtabliſhment, we look alſo with gratitude and ſatisfaction to a continuance of thoſe exertions which have been made to ſupport them. Much will juſtly be expected, and much we truſt may be hoped, from thoſe, whoſe labors in their reſpective ſtations for the public good are very properly repaid, not by odious and oppreſſive privileges and exemptions, not by ſeparate intereſts, but by a competent and neceſſary ſhare of diſtinction and authority: much, very much may be looked for, arguing from what has already been done, from that uſeful and reſpectable claſs of men, unknown to other States, who, by the peculiar happineſs of the Britiſh Conſtitution, form the intermediate links of that chain which unites the higher to the lower orders of ſociety: much alſo we may flatter ourſelves may ſtill be expected from the yet uncorrupted loyalty and general good ſenſe of the nation. And while, by thus continuing true to ourſelves, we preſerve the antient and venerable fabric of our Conſtitution from internal decay, let us not deſpair that the ſteady and perſevering valor of our Forces by ſea and land may yet be able to arreſt the progreſs of our external enemies.

After all, however, let us remember that it is not the arm of fleſh which can deliver us; and that when we look up to Him for aſſiſtance who alone is able to give it effectually, we muſt be careful to approach His altar with undefiled hands. Senſible that neither is "the race always to the ſwift, nor the battle to the "ſtrong, let us exert our utmoſt endeavours to recom- "mend ourſelves to His favor, in whoſe hands are the "iſſues of time and chance*;" and let every return of this day's ſolemnity bring with it ſome reformation of our principles and conduct. Nor let any one think that his ſtation is either high enough to claim an exemption from this call, or low enough to render his behaviour of no importance to the public. Formed as we are for ſociety, and connected together by mutual wants and dependencies, it is only from the perform- ance of our reſpective duties in the ſeveral relations we ſtand in to each other, that the general harmony of public virtue can reſult; the operation and effect of which is impeded by the ſame luſts and paſſions, which tend to debaſe and deſtroy the individual. Theſe it is which foſter and abet thoſe pernicious principles by which the bands of ſociety are broken, and thoſe juſt gradations of order and government, which prevail in every well-regulated ſtate, are either

* Eccl. ix, v. 11.

violently

violently torn up, or inſenſibly undermined. Hence intemperate luxury and deſtructive ambition among the great; hence reſtleſſneſs and impatience of uſeful reſtraint among the lower ranks; hence that forgetfulneſs of God, and that train of ſenſual appetites, the ſame in kind though different in form, pervading equally the whole community; hence conſequently the chaſtiſements of divine vengeance and the ultimate decay of empires. And I cannot but remark that if we ſuffer theſe cauſes to produce ſuch effects upon us, we are more without excuſe than any of thoſe Nations of antiquity from whoſe example we ought to take warning; inaſmuch as our preſent happineſs is ſecured by a better Conſtitution of Government, and our future hopes aſcertained by a benevolent and divine Revelation.

We of this age alſo have long been accuſtomed to aſſume to ourſelves pretenſions of ſuperior light and information; to boaſt of our advances in ſcience, and our improvement in moral theories; and, becauſe almoſt every ſubject which can employ the buſy mind of man has been more diffuſely and more generally diſcuſſed, to ſuppoſe therefore that it is better underſtood by us, than it was by our forefathers. But have we not a melancholy example before us, that this light, for want of proper application, may be turned into darkneſs;

neſs; and all theſe boaſted improvements end in nothing but the barbarities of Anarchy, and the impurities of Atheiſm? Be it remembered, therefore, that it reſts with ourſelves to hold faſt the advantages we enjoy, and convert them to our benefit rather than to our condemnation. If the talent committed to our charge be more valuable than that with which others are entruſted, by ſo much the more does it behove us to render a ſatisfactory account of it.

Let us then in time be aware of the dangers which await us, if we neglect ſo great ſalvation; let us conſider well, ere yet it be too late, the things which make for our peace; and, ſenſible of the connection that ſubſiſts between our ſeveral duties as men, as citizens, and as Chriſtians, let us cultivate the principles of that Goſpel, which alone, by regulating the heart and affections, can at once enable us to ſecure our own happineſs, and contribute to the welfare of our country.

FINIS.